

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 279

TM 029 084

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TITLE Follow-Up Study of the 1997 Pine Valley, Michigan High School Graduating Class.
PUB DATE 1998-05-00
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Aspiration; Cultural Awareness; *Curriculum Development; Educational Assessment; *Employment Patterns; Extracurricular Activities; Followup Studies; Graduate Surveys; *High School Graduates; High Schools; Program Improvement; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Michigan

ABSTRACT

This report describes the background, nature of, and results from a survey of the 1997 Pine Valley High School (Michigan) graduating class. Pine Valley is a name used for purposes of the report. The questionnaire, administered in June 1997, was designed to: (1) identify the curriculum areas students wished they had studied or studied in greater depth; (2) identify the elements in the high school that students believed prepared them well or not well to meet later challenges; and (3) learn from the perspectives of the student whether Pine Valley is making the organizational, curricular, instructional, and behavioral changes that are associated with academic and occupational success in the increasingly skill-based society. Of the 168 graduates, 87 (51%) completed surveys. Of these 87, almost all had been active in school activities such as athletics, speech, drama, music, and vocational clubs. As a result, this cohort included a large number of students who had made a substantial investment in their school and schooling. The respondents urged the school to demand more effort from students, to emphasize basic academic subjects and to offer more courses that prepared students for a job. Respondents generally agreed that the school provided a safe and disciplined environment and helped students get along with others from different racial, cultural, and other backgrounds. When these suggestions were related to ideas of various educational reform movements, room for improvement was noted in relating school lessons to real life, providing an interdisciplinary curriculum, and teamwork for both students and teachers. Other ideas for improvement include more active student participation, small group work, activities for problem solving, computer activities, and oral presentations. (Author/SLD)

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FOLLOW-UP STUDY
OF THE
1997 PINE VALLEY, MICHIGAN
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATING CLASS

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May, 1998

TM029084

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TITLE	Follow-Up Study of the 1997 Pine Valley, Michigan High School Graduates
INSTITUTION	Eastern Michigan University
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Aspirations, Educational Assessment; Educational Attitudes; Employment Patterns, Follow-up Studies, High School Graduates, High Schools, Program Improvement, Workforce Development
IDENTIFIERS	Eastern Michigan University

ABSTRACT

This report describes the background, the nature of, and the results from the administration of a survey to the 1997 Pine Valley High School graduating class. Pine Valley is an assumed name. The questionnaire administered in June, 1997 was designed to identify what curriculum areas students wished they had studied or studied in greater depth, what elements in the high school the students believe prepared them well and not well to meet present and future challenges, and to learn from the perspective of the student, whether Pine Valley High School is making the organizational, curricular, instructional and behavioral changes that are associated with academic and occupational success in our increasingly skill-based society. Of the 168 graduates, 87 students (51%) completed surveys. Of these 87 students, almost all were active in school activities: athletics, speech, drama, music, vocational clubs. Thus, the cohort included a large number of students who had made a substantial investment in their school and their schooling. The respondents urged the school to demand more effort from students, to emphasize basic academic subjects: math, English, science, social studies, languages, and to offer more courses that prepare students for a job. The respondents generally agreed that PVHS provided a safe and disciplined environment and helped students to get along with others from different racial, cultural and other backgrounds. In regard to the suggestions made by the various reform movements in education, room for improvement was noted in relating school lessons to real-life, providing interdisciplinary curriculum, team-working for both teachers and students, in more active student participation, small group work, activities for problem solving, computer activities and oral presentations.

Executive Summary

This report describes the background, the nature of, and the results from the completion of a questionnaire survey of the 1997 Pine Valley, Michigan High School graduating class.¹ The survey was designed to identify curriculum areas students wished they had studied or studied in greater depth, elements in the high school the students believe prepared them well and not well to meet present and future challenges, and to learn from the perspective of the student, whether Pine Valley High School is making the organizational, curricular, and instructional changes that are associated with academic and occupational success in our increasingly skill-based society.

Of the 168 graduates, 87 students (51%) completed surveys, 47 females, 40 males. Of the 87 respondents, 51 identified themselves as Caucasian, 23 African-American, 3 Asian, 3 Native-American, 2 Multi-Racial, 1 Hispanic. Of the 87 students, 73 were active in school activities: athletics, speech, drama, music, vocational clubs. In terms of grade point averages, 26 respondents reported their GPA was "Above 3.25", 56 "Between 2.1 and 3.25" and 4 "Between 1.2 and 2.0".

In terms of future plans, 44 plan to attend a four-year college, 30 plan to attend a two-year college, 5 plan to seek full-time work, 4 plan to enter the military, and 3 plan to attend a trade-technical school. One can conclude from the preceding data that the responding cohort included students who had made a substantial investment in their school and their schooling.

¹ The Pine Valley School District is an assumed name.

The respondents urged the school to demand more effort from students, to emphasize basic academic subjects: math, English, science, social studies, languages, and to offer more courses that prepare students for a job. The respondents generally agreed that PVHS provided a safe and disciplined environment and helped students to get along with others from different racial, cultural and other backgrounds. In regard to the suggestions made by the various reform movements in education, room for improvement was noted in relating school lessons to real-life, providing interdisciplinary curriculum, team-working for both teachers and students, planning for more active student participation, small group work, activities for problem solving, computer activities and oral presentations.

Introduction

In 1996, the Pine Valley School District and the Teacher Education Department at Eastern Michigan University entered into a collaborative venture to design and implement a study of the 1997 high school graduating class. The study involved the administration of a survey completed by the graduating class in June, 1997. A similar survey will be administered to graduating classes in the years to follow. The survey is designed to identify:

- what curriculum areas the students wished they had studied or studied in greater depth.
- what elements in the high school prepared them well and less well.
- whether the students perceive they had been exposed to the organizational, curricular and instructional practices associated with personal, academic and workplace success.
- plans each student has made for the immediate years after high school.

Beginning with the class of 1997, students in each class will be surveyed after five and ten years after graduation to learn whether the student's retrospective perceptions of their high school years have changed with the passage of time and to learn whether the graduate's immediate years after high school evolved according to plan.

Background of the School District

Pine Valley School District is in a culturally diverse urban community in the southeastern region of Michigan. The City of Pine Valley has a substantial number of low income housing units as well as single parent families, teen mothers and fathers, all of whom have limited resources. The student population is transient; the minority population, especially African-American students is growing and the poverty level is increasing. The number of students qualifying for the free and reduced lunch programs has been increasing annually and presently averages approximately 48%.

With below average student achievement scores on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), the district faces the challenge of a growing population of students considered educationally "at risk".

Background of the Study

The items that would be incorporated into the survey were inspired and ultimately derived from three sources of information. First, the education reform literature as found in ERIC documents, and recent articles in such journals in *Educational Leadership*, *Educational Researcher* and *Phi Delta KAPPAN* were found and read. The focus was on practices that should be in place in a secondary school in which personal, academic and/or workplace reform efforts were underway. Second, reports such as *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000* distributed by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1991, and the findings from Murnane and Levy research published in their book, *Teaching the Basic Skills* (1996) were examined. Finally, high school graduate surveys that were available through ERIC were gathered and analyzed for format and potential survey items. Four of these useful past surveys are as follows:

- **ED 299 289 Follow-Up Study Of The 1985 High School Graduates In The Los Angeles Unified School District.** Daniel Pike and others, Los Angeles Unified School District, September 1987. Reports the findings of a one year after graduation follow-up of graduates. Responses were obtained through a mailed questionnaire. Respondents were a 33% sample of the 9000+ graduates (N-3,057) who in themselves were a 50% sample of the entire graduating senior population of over 18,000. The Los Angeles study was repeated five years later and reported in

ED 330 772 289 Follow-Up Study Of The 1990 High School Graduates In The Los Angeles Unified School District.

- **ED 338 742 Follow-Up Study Of High School Graduates: Survey Of The Chicago Public Schools Class Of 1989**, Storey, Sandra and Qualle, Jesse. Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance, January, 1991. The purpose was to provide baseline information on the education and employment activities of the Class of 1989, the last class before the implementation of school reform. That school reform decentralized the school district placing more responsibility on school principals and local school councils. The survey asked graduates whether they were enrolled in school, whether employed, and whether they were going on to further schooling or working. Graduates were asked what prepared them well or not well, and to what extent they were influenced by parents, teachers and counselors.
- **ED 290 053 The Longitudinal Study Of Missouri High School Graduates, Final Report** by William Brandt and others-University of Missouri for the Missouri State Dept of Elementary and Secondary Education, October 1987. A five year longitudinal study of a sample of the 1981 graduates of thirteen vocational and matched non-vocational high schools. The purpose of the study was to determine the successes and difficulties of graduates in using skills and knowledge acquired in high school to make a successful and economically rewarding transition from high school into the immediate post high school years.

Study Procedure

Planning meetings involving key faculty from Eastern Michigan University and the Executive Director of Academic Services for the School District of Pine Valley were held in the Spring of 1996. An early draft of the survey was then shared with a planning team consisting of the aforementioned personnel with the addition of the high school principal and assistant principal, a high school counselor, a high school teacher and the coordinator of the regional career technical center. The planning team made suggestions for improvement and the survey was revised accordingly. A three-page description and explanation of the purposes of the study was prepared and distributed to key decision-makers in the district including the teacher union leadership. An explicit statement was made that the study was not designed to gather evidence to reduce or eliminate programs or departments nor to evaluate the performance of teachers. In October, 1996, the planning team met with all of the high school unit department heads and they in turn solicited input from their respective teachers and staff. Again, the draft survey instrument was revised. In November, 1996, the now nearly final survey was pilot tested with a group of twenty-five students who completed it and made recommended changes. After this last process of revision was completed the final version was prepared for administration in June, 1997.

Plans were made to administer the survey as an activity during the day of graduation practice. Unfortunately, that proved not to be feasible and it was administered to students in selected classes. That last minute change in plan reduced the scope and usefulness of the survey as only one-half the graduates responded to it.

Survey Structure

The survey consisted of five groups of items.

- Demographic items (gender, race, grade point average, plans for next two years)
- Courses taken, courses that will help, courses student wished to take or wished to take more of and special programs in which student participated
- Open ended questions to obtain written comments about what prepared the student well and not well
- Seventeen items in which students responded from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" about statements made about Pine Valley High School
- Eighteen items in which students expressed whether they "Always" to "Never" experienced a given organizational, curriculum or instructional practice at Pine Valley High School

Survey Findings

Leaving aside the demographic items whose results were described previously and the information generated by the items related to courses, the results from the "Agree/Disagree" and the "Always/Never" items are interesting and reportable. The items were conceived as reflective of three educational reform movements. These reform movements and the items that fit within each are described in Figure 1. The items can serve as a platform for comparison studies in the years to follow in Pine Valley and in other school districts.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

1. *Personal Development Practices* – Student Participation, Involvement, Inquiry, Real-Life Connections, Feedback, Interdisciplinary, Teaming, Authentic Learning

Items

Teachers related lessons to daily living tasks
Experienced activities to meet challenges in adult life
Teachers worked in teams
Experienced interdisciplinary units and lessons
Experienced lessons that required active participation
Included brainstorming activities for problem solving
Had opportunities for small group activities
Displayed learning through performances and portfolios
Collecting, organizing and analyzing data for decision-making
Provided safe and disciplined learning environment
Students were aware of behavioral expectations
Helped students to get along with others from different racial, cultural backgrounds
Appropriate size classes

2. *Academic Development Practices* – core subjects, academic focus, rigor, effort

Items

Demanded effort from me
Placed emphasis on basic academic subjects
Placed emphasis on foreign language study
Made me confident in math
Made me confident in writing
Had opportunities to discuss subject matter
My courses made me think
My courses that were challenging
Teachers were clear about their learning expectations
Teachers provided timely information about learning progress

3. *Workforce Development Practices* – Career Development, Teamwork, Work Focused Activities

Items

Teachers a positive influence in my career planning
Counselors positive in my career planning
School made me aware of career opportunities
School should place more emphasis on job preparation
Want more emphasis on vocational/technical subjects
Teachers related lessons to the workplace
Experienced lessons that developed my team-working skills
Had opportunities for oral presentations that apply to workplace
Lessons assisted me to develop computer competency
Had opportunities for job shadowing/internships

Figure 1. Educational Reform Movements and the Survey Items That Fit Within Them

The findings from the items subsumed under "Personal Development Practices" follow. Two items that focused on life outside the classroom, *"teachers related lessons to daily living tasks"* and students experienced *"activities to meet challenges in adult life"* elicited similar response patterns. Slightly more than half (53%) of the respondents agreed that teachers related lessons to daily living, and that students frequently or almost always experienced activities to meet adult life challenges (54%). Those results are consistent with the Missouri longitudinal study described previously (ED 290 053). After being out of high school for five years, when asked "what schools should do in preparing students to make the transition to the post-high school world " the responses in order of frequency were:

- encourage further education
- stress hard work
- teach maturity
- tell students what it is like in the real-world
- provide career counseling.

The next two items involving curricular and organization integration *"teachers worked in teams"* and students experienced *"interdisciplinary units and lessons"* also elicited a similar response pattern. A large majority (83%) agreed that they seldom or never experienced instruction by teams of teachers or interdisciplinary units or lessons (81%).

The next five items focus on instructional practices that enhance personal learning. These items are: lessons required students' *active participation*, students experienced *brainstorming activities for problem solving*; *had opportunities for small group activities*; *displayed learning through performances and portfolios*, and experienced lessons requiring *collecting, organizing and analyzing data for decision-making*.

In order of the level of agreement, a majority (60%) of respondents agreed that they had frequently or almost always experienced lessons requiring collecting, organizing and analyzing data for decision-making, frequently or almost always (57%) had opportunities to display learning through projects, portfolios and performances and frequently or almost always experienced activities for problem-solving (51%). Fewer than half (47%) the respondents agreed that they frequently or almost always experienced lessons that required their active participation and frequently or almost always experienced many small-group activities (45%).

The final group of items under "Personal Development Practices", the school provided a *safe and disciplined learning environment*, teachers provided *clear behavioral expectations*, the school *helped students to get along with others from different racial, cultural backgrounds*, and experienced *appropriate size classes* involve issues of behavior, diversity and class size. A substantial majority (77%) agreed that teachers provided clear behavioral expectations and that the school provided a safe and disciplined learning environment (68%) In regard to diversity, there was equally substantial agreement (68%) that the school helped students to get along with others from different racial, cultural and other backgrounds. In regard to class size a substantial majority agreed that they frequently or almost always experienced appropriate sized classes (69%).

The findings from the items subsumed under "Academic Development Practices" follow. One item elicited an especially interesting finding. A substantial majority of respondents (74%) were in agreement with the prompt that the school should *have demanded more effort from me*. When the responses were broken down by race, a statistically significant difference between the responses of Caucasian and

African-American students was discovered. Caucasian students were more likely to Strongly Agree that *more effort should have been demanded of me* (17 of 49 for Caucasians or 35% and 4 of 21 for African-Americans or 19%). Further surveys are needed to assess the validity and persistence of the differential results resulting from this item.

A set of items focused on academic preparation: The respondents expressed wide agreement (84%) with the statement that school should place *more emphasis on basic academic subjects*. That is consistent with the findings in the Los Angeles (ED 299 289) Follow Up study referred to earlier. In that survey the respondents expressed a desire for "more difficult educational requirements". There was also agreement although it was less widespread (53%) that the school should place *more emphasis on foreign language* studies, that the school had prepared students to *be confident in facing future writing tasks* (63%) and had prepared students to *be confident in facing future math tasks* (55%).

A majority of respondents agreed (57%) that students frequently or almost always *had opportunities to discuss subject matter with teachers and other students*, and that they frequently or almost always experienced *courses that made me think* (52%). A substantial majority (77%) agreed that they frequently or almost always experienced *challenging courses*.

Finally, two items focused on learning expectations and feedback on learning progress. Although a majority (57%) agreed that teachers *provided timely information about learning progress*, only forty percent (40%) of the respondents agreed that *teachers were clear about learning expectations*.

Moving on to the third category, "Workforce Development Practices" a majority (58%) of the respondents agreed *that teachers had a positive influence in my career planning*. A smaller majority (52%) of the respondents agreed *that counselors had a positive influence in my career planning*. The respondents were equally divided on whether the *school made me aware of career opportunities*. In the Chicago graduate study described earlier (ED 338 742), graduates overwhelmingly reported that their parents had influenced their plans a great deal (74%). Counselors and principals had the least influence. The authors concluded "The difference between parents' influence and that of teachers, principals and counselors is striking."

An area that received a resounding level of support involved preparation for employment. When asked if the *school should place more emphasis on job preparation* a large majority (80%) of respondents agreed. Given the support for an emphasis on job preparation it is not surprising that a majority (60%) agreed that the school *should provide more emphasis on vocational/technical subjects*. The emphasis on job preparation is consistent with the Missouri study. In that study, when asked immediately after graduation what schools should do to prepare students to make the transition to the post-high school world the clear winner in terms of frequency of response was "provide classes that give job experience." Also, in the Los Angeles study (ED 299 289) analysis of the comments revealed that one often repeated recommendation was that graduates wanted more preparation for a job.

There were a series of items that focused on the workplace environment and skills needed to be successful as an employee in a high-performance, high-paying business or industry. A majority (57%) of respondents agreed that *teachers related lessons to the workplace*. However, a large majority (67%) of respondents agreed that

they seldom or never experienced *job shadowing or internships in a workplace outside the school*. As with the item concerning effort demanded reported earlier, there was a statistically significant difference between the responses of Caucasian and African-American students. African-American students were more likely to experience job shadowing or internship experiences. Of the twenty African-American responses thirteen reported that they frequently or almost always experienced shadowing or internships while only nine of forty-nine Caucasians made similar responses.

Three items delved into specific workplace related school practices: team-working, developing computer competencies, and making oral presentations appropriate to the workplace. A majority (55%) of the respondents agreed that they frequently or almost always experienced *lessons that developed my team-working skills*. However, only 41 percent of respondents agreed that they frequently or almost always experienced *lessons that assisted me to become computer competent*. Even fewer respondents, only 28 percent, indicated that they frequently or almost always experienced *opportunities for oral presentations that apply to workplace*.

Summary of Comments

The graduates were asked an open ended question, **what was there about our school that prepared you well?** The following responses were made by five or more students in order of frequency:

- Teachers who cared, who were helpful, who were good - 15
- I learned about people and the real world - 10
- Coop, Vocational Education, Regional Career Technical Center - 10
- Humanities - 6

In addition, there were a variety of subject areas and specialized courses mentioned.

The students were also asked, **what was there about our school that has not prepared you well?** The following responses were made by five or more students in order of frequency:

- Teachers who didn't teach, who didn't care - 15
- Poorly motivated, behaved students - 11
- Lack of discipline - 8
- Low academic expectations - 7
- Too little career and college counseling - 6

In addition, there were a variety of subject areas mentioned.

Conclusions

The 1997 survey was completed by approximately 50% of the graduating class 87 of 168 students. The sample encompassed those students who were active in extra-curricular activities, band, drama, athletics and vocational education. Thus, the conclusions must be tempered by that reality.

The call for the school to "place more emphasis on basic academic subjects" agreed to by 84% of the respondents and to "demand more effort from me" as requested by 74% while at the same time "placing more emphasis on preparation for a job" agreed to by 80% is a seemingly contradictory result. Yet, as recently advocated by the Director of the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, academic and vocational studies must be integrated in the high school of the future. To achieve this integration, more collegial teacher activity, cooperative student learning, student self-direction and creative decision-making are recommended. Students should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, to understand and manage their career options, to develop social skills and a maturity level that will help them interact with peers and adults.

In the 1997 graduate survey an agenda for school improvement can be found in the responses to survey items such as relating school lessons to real-life, providing interdisciplinary curriculum, team-working for both teachers and students, planning for more active student participation, small group work, activities for problem solving, computer activities and oral presentations.

Encouraging findings from the survey are noted in responses to the safety and diversity items. PVHS provided a safe and disciplined environment and helped

students to get along with others from different racial, cultural and other backgrounds, both eliciting 68% agreement. A potential area for discussion surfaces in the different responses to the two items about expectations. The respondents (77%) agreed that teachers have made their expectations about behavior clear while only 40% agreed that the teachers made their expectations about learning clear. Finally, the responses to the items concerning whether teachers, counselors and the school, in general, have influenced students' career choices can lead to the development of program activities to enhance career development.

Future Developments

Plans have come to fruition to replicate the 1997 survey with the Pine Valley High School Class of 1998 and to survey the graduates from two additional nearby school districts. Strategies have been developed that can ensure a larger and more representative sample of graduates. Finally, a new area of investigation, that being parental and community involvement in school activities will be integrated into the survey. Three parental/community involvement items are as follows:

My school:

- encouraged my family to become a partner in making decisions about my education and my career development.
- teachers and administrators communicated with my home about school policies and activities as well as about my learning progress.

During my years in my high school, I experienced:

- a project in which the school worked as a partner with other organizations to improve the school and/or the community.